

## **Yukon River Solid Waste Backhaul and Recycling Program**

### **EPA Region 10 – Alaska**

**Geographic location:** Yukon River Watershed in Alaska and the Yukon Territory  
The Yukon is North America's 4<sup>th</sup> largest river; it is 2,100 miles long and has a 330,000 square mile watershed. The Yukon River is host to the largest inland run of salmon on the continent and its watershed is home to 11% of the Tribes in the United States and 23% of the Tribes in Alaska.

**Description of activity:** The harsh northern climate (temperature swings ranging from - 60 degrees to +105 degrees) and remoteness (most people live more than 300 miles from the road system) of the Yukon River tribal communities complicate stewardship efforts. Third world living conditions with inadequate solid waste and sewage systems highlight the many day-to-day obstacles faced by Yukon River Tribes.

Yukon River Tribes take personal responsibility to improve household hazardous waste and community wide solid waste and sewage systems leading to affordable and sub-arctic appropriate and proven systems (e.g. heating community buildings with discarded paper products and with used oil which is broken down on the molecular level). The Yukon River Inter-Tribal Watershed Council (YRITWC) is a consortia of 66 indigenous governments. Yukon River Tribal governments signed a treaty agreeing to keep the river pristine for future generations. In 1999 the Tribes of the Yukon River watershed agreed by consensus to improve their respective sewage and solid waste systems.

This massive effort is coordinated with the volunteer commitments of the Tribes, assisted by the municipalities and made possible by the volunteer efforts of more than twenty-three transportation companies that have united together to transport materials to destination points. The result is 100% recycling and reuse of materials being backhauled. A PSA announcement shown to Alaskan viewers during last year's Super-bowl half-time show acknowledged the more than one million dollar in-kind contributions of the transportation companies.

Backhaul efforts have been successful in the Region. Over 6 million pounds of hazardous waste and recyclable materials have been removed from villages. Additionally, antifreeze is being recycled for reuse and income generation and various forms of waste to energy are being explored. Used cars, refrigerators, freezers, batteries, used oil tanks, antifreeze, fluorescent light bulbs and computes are removed from community landfills, resulting in the prevention of contaminants from entering into the watershed and doubling of the life span of rural landfills, saving the State of Alaska and the local Tribal and municipal governments tens of million of dollars.

The YRITWC has utilized U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Indian General Assistance Program and Solid Waste/Hazardous Waste funding combined with U.S. Department of Agriculture funding to provide and establish relevant job training. The results have been job creation, regional recycling hubs, and most importantly, preventing contaminants from entering the Yukon River.

The YRITWC works with other inter-tribal watershed councils in Alaska and the Pacific North West, and is a partner of the Indigenous Waters Network uniting Native American watershed protection efforts together with the goal of learning from and replicating successful approaches. External exposure of the Council has greatly expanded since

the completion of the documentary, "Yukon Circles" which has gained entry into 14 film festivals and the National Museum of American Indian Film and Video Festival. The film is now in the permanent archives of the museum.

The innovations of the YRITWC were recognized by the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and High Honors was awarded.

The YRITWC is a paradigm shift in environmental stewardship which is tribally-drive and watershed based, involving federal, state, tribal, and local governments and the business and non-profit community.

**Interagency partners:** The YRITWC is primarily funded by US EPA, and also works with and receives grants from the US Department of Agriculture, Department of Interior - United States Geological Survey and Bureau of Lands Management, National Science Foundation and the Administration for Native Americans.

**Local partners:** Sixty-six indigenous governments, +30 municipalities, transportation companies and multiple environmental groups.

**Activity URL:** [www.yritwc.com](http://www.yritwc.com)